

# ***IOWA OUTDOORS***

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

**[www.iowadnr.gov](http://www.iowadnr.gov)**

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## **STATE PARKS WINDING DOWN BUSY 2007 SEASON**

It will go down as one of the best camping seasons in recent years. State park campgrounds filled early, weathered the July heat and the August monsoon, and were bursting at the seams for Labor Day.

“We had an excellent camping season in our state parks,” said Kevin Szcodronski, chief of the State Parks bureau for the DNR. “We had a strong spring, which was particularly good for us. We saw an increase in the use of the reservation system, especially around the holiday weekends. If campers don’t get their reservation early in that 90 day window, in some parks, the reserved sites may be gone.”

“Our camping season was good and our cabin rental was excellent,” said Merrill Lucas, park manager at Lake Darling State Park for the past 35 seasons. Lucas gave credit to the work to improve the water quality in the lake which attracted more people to the beach, increased day use, and heavy weekend use.

“We’d get new people in the park all the time,” Lucas said. Often, the new visitors lived within 20 or 30 miles of the park and had driven past the entrance but never made the drive in, he said.

Two hours to the north, Dave Sunne, park ranger at Backbone State Park, said his park was as busy as he can ever remember. On many weekends, campers looking for an

electrical site had to be turned away, and on a number of occasions, all campsites were filled.

“This was one of the busiest summers I can remember during my 10 years,” Sunne said. “I wish all of our summers could be like this.”

Use at Pine Lake State Park was higher than previous years, and park manager Don Primus said the recent park and campground improvements and the park concession were all factors. The cabins are extremely busy. Families with young children are coming to the campground. The newly paved trails and campground roads are more training-wheel friendly than the old gravel versions.

The scenic views and bargain prices for lodges and shelters brought a number of weddings and special events into state parks.

Pine Lake held a sand castle building contest in July that had 200 people build 17 castles on the beach. Lake Darling hosted 5, 10 and 15 Kilometer fun runs and races in the spring and fall on the 11 miles of trails surrounding the lake.

Backbone held a Christmas in July where campers decorated their campsites. “We had a lot of really good participation. Everyone had a good time and we are planning to do it again next year,” Sunne said.

Campers continue to use the parks during peak fall colors, fall fishing and wildlife viewing. “We still have reservations coming in, not like before Labor Day, but they are there. October is one of the best times to come camping because the leaves change colors and the bass fishing is best,” Primus said.

Iowa’s peak camping season ends on Sept. 30. The off-season is Oct. 1 through April 30. Final campground and visitor numbers will not be available until winter 2008.

**For media inquiries, contact Szczodronski at 515-281-8674.**

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## **DNR THANKS VOLUNTEER CAMPGROUND HOSTS**

FOREST CITY - The Iowa Department of Natural Resources said “thank you” to a group of important volunteers during the fifth annual Campground Host Recognition Celebration took place at the Forest City YMCA.

Roughly one-third of Iowa’s 124 campground hosts attended the event. DNR officials honored them for the vital services they provide visitors to Iowa’s State Parks.

“We receive countless positive comments from parks visitors about the great service you provide,” said Kevin Szcodronski, DNR State Parks Bureau Chief. “On behalf of all DNR staff we thank you for your invaluable contribution in helping Iowans connect with the outdoors.”

Campground hosts serve as information sources and general laborers at state parks. They greet visitors, answer questions and often help clean and maintain park facilities. Hosts live and work on campgrounds during the busy summer season.

“This is my first year and I’ve really enjoyed it,” said Charles Wilson, host at Lake Manawa State Park. “I’ve made some good friends and I’m looking forward to helping out next year.”

Most campground hosts arrived at Pilot Knob State Park to enjoy free camping, take a tour of Winnebago Industries, and join a potluck dinner at sunset, complete with campfire stories provided by Kris Meyer from Storybridge Creations, in Forest City. DNR officials treated the hosts to a catered lunch, gave them certificates of appreciation and brought in presenters to speak on Mountain Lions and the Emerald Ash Borer.

Last year, more than 108,000 volunteers served with the Iowa DNR, contributing the work of approximately 75 full-time employees. Their service amounts to a \$2.3 million gift to the DNR each year. Parks volunteers — including campground hosts — account for about 40-percent of that total.

**For more information, contact Merry Rankin at (515) 281-0878 or at [Merry.Rankin@dnr.state.ia.us](mailto:Merry.Rankin@dnr.state.ia.us).**

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[electronic photo available]

## **FOR IOWA HUMMINGBIRD ENTHUSIASTS --- IT’S BEEN THE MIGRATION OF A LIFETIME**

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

It’s been a late summer migration that backyard bird feeding enthusiasts will be remembering for years. I’m hearing about it everywhere I travel. Outdoor classrooms, gas stations, at the local feed store, down at the Main Street coffee table, everywhere. People who enjoy seeing birds are excited, and they should be. For many, September 2007 has been the scene of a hummingbird invasion like no other.

By late August, backyard flower beds and sugar water feeding stations were getting busy as increasing numbers of ruby-throated hummingbirds arrived in the state. It

didn't take long for birders to catch the hint that this year's flight contained the makings of an exceptional migration. They weren't wrong. The invasion continued to gather momentum until, by the second week of September, it seemed as if every single feeder and every single nectar producing plant was being visited by these tiny and intriguing birds.

But the seasons are changing and the time is near for ruby-throats to continue their migration. Last Saturday morning [September 15] much of the state received its first killing frost. In Iowa's northern regions, temperatures dropped to as low as 27 degrees. For a lot of folks it was a signal to cover the tomatoes and bring in the sugar water bird feeders.

Covering the tomatoes was a good move, but taking down the feeders was a definite mistake.

Instead of ending, this fall's hummingbird migration has just seemed to pick up more steam. Most birders, including those living in extreme northern Iowa, agree that the past week has been better ever with a near constant stream of new arrivals showing up to probe late season flowers or refuel at those familiar red syrup feeders.

Hummingbird survival is largely dependant upon obtaining a high energy, high sugar diet of natural plant nectar. Consequently, their days in the north are limited. But as hummingbirds continue their journey to far away places in the south, they'll leave Iowa birders with plenty to talk about during the cold months ahead.

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[electronic photo available]

## **FAMOUS IOWA SCIENTIST MAKES RARE DISCOVERY**

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

While participating in a current study of rare turtle populations on the Mississippi river at the Big Sand Mound Prairie Preserve near Muscatine, reptile researcher Jim Christenson, made an even rarer discovery which led to the eventual capture and documentation of the federally endangered copper-bellied water snake in Iowa.

The saga began when Christenson, a natural history author, lecturer, and retired professor of biology at Drake University, heard the distinct call of a bullfrog in distress. Knowing that distress calls often lead to unexpected and interesting observations, Christenson lost no time in making his way to the scene. Arriving at the edge of a large backwater pond, he discovered that the frog was already being swallowed --- head first -- - by a very large water snake.

Christenson attempted an immediate capture, but the snake eluded him and quickly escaped into dense underwater vegetation. An intensive, thirty minute search effort produced nothing.

Suddenly, though quieter now, the distress calls began again. Quickly sneaking to the new location, Christenson was amazed to find that the somewhat muffled calls were now being emitted from the inside, rather than the outside, of the now bulging reptile.

This time the capture was successful, and Christenson quickly realized that he made a rare find. Although the scientist was alone, he did manage a one handed, digital photo to document the occasion.

Upon release, the highly agitated water snake promptly regurgitated its meal. Celebrating its new lease on life, the apparently indestructible bullfrog quickly hopped to the pond, dove in, and disappeared beneath the surface. In spite of being in the snake's belly for more than half an hour, the frog appeared no worse for wear.

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## **2007 FORT ATKINSON RENDEZVOUS**

The military post grounds of Fort Atkinson will be the site of the 31<sup>st</sup> annual frontier rendezvous scheduled for Saturday & Sunday, Sept. 29-30. Once again, over 130 tents and teepees will be set up on the post grounds with hundreds of rendezvous participants dressed in period costumes or uniforms of the 1840s time period.

Ron Franzen and Steve Sindelar, co-chairpersons of the Friends of Fort Atkinson Rendezvous Committee, announced that the theme for the 31<sup>st</sup> Fort Atkinson Rendezvous is "Raising the Colors" which relates to the military tradition of running the flag up the flag pole inside the fort grounds each morning to start the day. At 12:15 p.m. on Saturday, a rededication program will take place at the center of the post grounds when a large, 26-star flag will be hoisted up the flag pole. Starting in 1840, and lasting until 1845, a 26-star flag was flown at the military post.

This year's souvenir medallion, designed by local artist, LuAnne Becker, features the historic 26-star U.S. flag. The medallion will be for sale on the fort grounds during the rendezvous weekend.

Numerous 'trade blankets' will be laid out next to the teepees displaying pioneer items such as scrimshaw, glassware, hand-woven baskets, animal traps, muskets, pottery, and other pioneer clothes and tools of the time period. Other pioneer sights and sounds that will greet visitors including the pounding of hot iron on the anvil by the blacksmith, the training of soldiers dressed in period military uniform, the blast of the cannon, and the shooting of the anvil.

Contests related to pioneer skills include the flint & steel (fire starting) contest, tomahawk throwing, a cooking contest, bullwhip contest, turkey calling contest, and a shooting contest at the quarry area.

1840s Kid's Games will be available for children to participate in both afternoons, and the Country Road Players will perform a melodrama both days titled "Run to the Roundhouse Nellie, They Can't Corner You There!"

There is no admission charge to the Rendezvous to observe the displays and demonstrations. Visitors can walk up to the fort; free shuttle busses with continuous service to and from the front gate of the fort will be available both days.

The Fort Atkinson Rendezvous is sponsored by the Fort Atkinson community and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. It is held with permission of the Iowa State Preserves Board.

**Ron Frantzen, co-chairperson of rendezvous committee: (563)534-7502**

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